

Let's De-Glamourize Hell



RADIO MESSAGE

Delivered Sunday, June 19, 1949

by

REV. PETER ELDERSVELD

on

THE BACK TO GOD HOUR



The Denominational Broadcast of
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH
on the Mutual Network and Independent Stations

LET'S DE-GLAMOURIZE HELL

"Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand: Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

—Matthew 25:41

This will undoubtedly be the most unpopular sermon I have preached throughout this radio season. I can easily recall the last time I dealt with the subject of "hell" exclusively on this broadcast, and I know that many people didn't like it. Today I am going to say the very same things again, in much the same way, and probably to many of the same people. In fact, I am using the very same subject and text. That may seem strange in this day when preachers are expected to say only the things people like to hear. But, of course, we are called by God to say the things he likes to have us say, whether or not men like to hear them. And besides, we know that there is someone else who doesn't like to have us talk about hell, namely, the devil. We preachers try very hard not to say the things that please him. Moreover, God wants us to tell the truth about hell because it is good for men to hear about it. For God loves the sinner, and therefore he tells him what hell is like, so that he may avoid the place and find his way to heaven instead.

One of the more gruesome incidents coming out of the last war took place when a naval vessel was sinking fast. The sailors knew it was only a matter of minutes before they would be swallowed up by the waters. A few of them were praying, others trembled with fear, still others were stoically waiting for the inevitable. But one of the boys stepped to the edge of the

ship, took one look around at his fellows, and as he jumped to his death in the angry deep he called back to them: "I'll be seeing you in hell, boys!" And with that shout dying on his lips he was hurled into eternity.

I picked up a magazine one day which had the most lurid pictures to illustrate a story about a certain night club that was called "Hell." In what was undoubtedly considered to be a fine bit of sophisticated humor, it shamelessly portrayed the patrons of that night club going out for an evening in "hell" when they wanted to indulge in a round of sinful carousing and drunkenness. In making their dates for such an evening they would call out to each other: "See you in Hell tonight."

It is considered to be quite acceptable for people to attend a masquerade in the garb of the devil, or wearing such apparel as one might expect to wear in hell. Modern literature even goes so far as to picture its heroes preferring the company of the damned in hell to the drab and monotonous existence of a heaven where man will miss all the delights and thrills and fun of a sinful life.

Perhaps the most popular word in our American vocabulary is the word "hell," judging at least by its common usage in ordinary speech. It is a prefix to a sentence in which one wishes to be very emphatic. It is an adjective to describe any kind of situation that is altogether a mess. It is a noun to identify the place to which we quickly consign those with whom we disagree. It is an expletive, a substitute for the exclamation point, and even a competitor for the question mark in every-day speech. As a certain linguist put it recently, at the present rate of its increasing popularity, the word "hell" will soon replace

the word "okay" as the most common in American diction. Even my newspaper, which formerly forbade its appearance in print, has now come to a position where "hell" must decorate almost every page. Otherwise respectable editors will use it to put zest into their writings.

Preachers are bitterly denounced for mentioning the word hell from the pulpit. In fact, if they dare to make so much as a passing reference to it, ministers are expected to dig up all sorts of sweet synonyms, in order not to offend the fine sensibilities of their priggish congregations. But look who's talking about hell today? The same people who shudder when it is mentioned in the pulpit—not just the low-brows, but the high-brows of our vaunted civilization. About two years ago I talked with a radio executive about the pros and cons of religious programs today. He had bitter distaste for preachers who bring hell-fire sermons. And he felt himself very superior to that brand of religion. But in all of his elegance he could not refrain from using the word "hell" to punctuate the conversation. It was the most conspicuous word in his vocabulary. You may say that hell has a certain glamour for modern man. And if it be true that the devil grinned in glee when he succeeded in tempting our first parents in the garden, it can now be said that he probably rocks with laughter when he beholds modern man kidding himself about hell, putting a new face on it, telling himself it is probably all a myth anyway, and so adopting the word and the idea as a vital part of his up-to-date sophisticated language and thinking.

It is high time that hell be stripped of its glamour. We had better get back to the old-fashioned truth about the place, get rid of our

high-brow delusions, and be a bit more realistic. There are certain forces operating around us today which ought to sober us a bit. Too bad that so many people are very slow to catch on. The old Bible doctrine about hell does not look quite so silly to the thinking man when he considers it in the light of what science has lately uncovered. At least a few people have been frightened by the devastating result of atomic energy, and, to them, the old picture of hell does not look to be so mythical any more.

In these latter days the evidences of hell have been found in ordinary laboratories where atomic research has been carried on. A single bomb on Hiroshima, another on Nagasaki, then subsequent experiments to test the scope of deadly radio-activity; and although these combined revelations of atomic power give us only the faintest glimpse of what the Bible means when it speaks of fire and brimstone, the worm that dieth not, the gnashing of teeth, and the lake of fire, yet a few scientists and careful observers have reached a point of intelligent sobriety which makes them talk in fearful tones about the real possibility of wiping out this planet with dreadful explosions. The prophets of hell have departed from our pulpits, but a new generation of them has emerged from the laboratories of modern science, instead of theological seminaries. The possibility of there being a place called hell is at least indicated in these days, and we even hear voices that tell us our civilization is teetering over the very brink of it.

I may be accused of disturbing what is left of our peace of mind, but I want to see hell completely stripped of its glamour. And so I will remind you of a verse in the Scripture which is not a manufactured description by an

over-emotional preacher, but a blunt statement by the Savior himself, found in Matthew 25:41. More realistic than all the findings of atomic scientists, are these plain words: "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand: Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." That was a forthright prophecy of the judgment day, a point-blank statement of two simple facts: that there is a prepared place of eternal punishment called hell, and that many people are actually going there. Remember, it isn't my idea. I'm only quoting Jesus on it.

This is the same Jesus, meek and mild, who tenderly said: "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The Jesus who lovingly took little tots in His arms, and blessed them. The Jesus who quietly healed the sick, made the blind to see, and the lame to walk. This is the Jesus who could sympathize so deeply with mankind that the tomb of a friend moved Him to real tears. The Jesus who spoke about love for one's enemies, doing good unto those who hate you. turning the other cheek instead of seeking revenge. This Jesus who had so much love and tenderness in His soul, who spent Himself in the service of others, and stooped to bear the burdens of men—but He said there is a hell, an everlasting lake of fire; and He said that He, Himself, is actually going to send people to hell if they are not saved from their sins.

Now, I have heard a lot of people extol the teachings of Jesus, and they always hold Him up to us as the Master. But why do they omit, or deny, this teaching of His? If He cannot be considered reliable when He talks about hell, then all His teaching about love, kindness, the

so-called golden rule, and goodness are thoroughly discredited as well. It is not fair to give a one-sided picture of Him. He believed in hell, thought it was a real place, and repeatedly warned men that final retribution for their sins would be exacted from them in hell if they did not repent and turn to Him to save them.

I know, of course, that almost every religion has some kind of hell in it. And some of them are described in the most hideous ways. For that reason, perhaps, some Christian preachers have felt called upon to produce a hell which was the worst of all, and their methods to that end have not always been according to Scripture. I have no desire to indulge in that kind of morbid speculation, but it may be said that no human attempt to describe hell, no matter how fanciful it may be, can adequately express the horror of that place to which the unforgiven sinner must go to pay the eternal price for sin.

I would recommend that if you really want to see a vivid demonstration of hell you should stand at Calvary's cross and see what Jesus experienced when He bore the torments of hell for us! Without taking time to consider the agony that preceded, behold those three hours of hellish darkness, which were a concentrated form of eternal darkness for Him. And in the midst of it listen to that piercing cry of a tortured soul, bearing the full wrath of heaven. "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me!" That was hell, eternity without God, packed into the space of three awful hours!

You may want to ask: how can a good God send men to hell, or punish His own Son on their behalf? The answer is very simple: because He is good. Goodness is gone if it tolerates badness.

God is no longer God if He will compromise with evil. To maintain His goodness He must completely triumph over evil. There can be no bridge between the two. Good and evil are engaged in a pitched battle. The fighting is fierce. The very being of God is at stake. Following the thought of another theologian, you may say, the same way, that you can no more think of a free nation without judges and jails, than you can think of a free world without judgment and hell. No state or national constitution would exist for six months on the basis of a liberal Christianity which denies the reality of hell. You can disbelieve in Sing Sing, if you want to, but then you must also disbelieve in justice and goodness. If it is right to punish the criminal, then there must be guilt attached to his crime. And if he is guilty he is responsible. Deny the right to punish him, and it makes no difference what he does. There is no more goodness then. Anything he does is all right. And if you apply that kind of reasoning to God's government of the world, you are left with chaos and despair.

You ought to know on which side you belong. You are on the side of guilt and hell so long as your sin is not paid for. You are at liberty, of course, to entertain the wild dream that you can pay for your crime yourself, and triumph completely over sin on your own merit. But let me caution you that no mere man has ever done it so far. I am going to admit hopelessness on that point, and put myself in the grace of our Substitute, Jesus Christ, who is the only one I know that has offered to do it for me, and is able to make good His promise. Millions of souls have gone to glory already because they admitted their inability, and put their trust in the Savior

to conquer hell for them. Either you must have Him to suffer hell for you in that eternal moment on Calvary, or you must go there yourself eternally.

And don't think that mere lip service is going to deliver you from this horrible place. My text is found in a passage which describes the believers as people who showed their faith by their deeds, and the unbelievers as people who made a lot of talk about religion in this life, but their way of living was far from consistent with all of their talk. I may have a lot of people in my audience who are respectfully considered to be Christians. You are identified with the Church. You go through all the ritual and routine of religion. You have made a public profession of your faith, you go out of your way to admonish other people who don't measure up to your particular standards. Yes, you practice a lot of religion, but listen, there are going to be a lot of people like that in hell too. Don't misunderstand me. I am not condemning the Church. I believe every real Christian should be a faithful member of a true church in the Kingdom of God. But that membership is only an expression of your faith and a means to strengthen it. It is not your Salvation, and especially not when yours is only a formal connection. There are going to be church members in hell.

The point is that if you are genuinely trusting in Jesus Christ to deliver you from paying the penalties of hell, you will be living a life that shows it. A man who loves the ways of sin, tries to get as close as he can to the fires of hell, and will even be singed frequently because he gets too close, is not a man who cares a great deal about being delivered from it. You had better examine your life, to see if it correctly repre-

The Back to God Hour message reprinted in this pamphlet was heard over the Mutual Network and independent stations from Coast to Coast, in Canada, and the U.S.A.

If you would like to have a copy of our complete log of stations and additional copies of this message for distribution to others, write to The Back to God Hour, Box 773—Chicago, Ill., and we will be happy to mail them to you without obligation.
